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ABSTRACT

The process of interference in second language learning is examined. A case study involving the acquisition of English in a natural environment by a 33-year-old French speaker is presented. Spontaneous speech was recorded in 30-minute sessions at 1- to 2-week intervals over a period of 4 months. Analysis indicates that the process of lexical acquisition of verbs in English is similar for both first and second language learners. Certain instances of so called "interference errors" by second language learners can be seen as lexical overgeneralizations similar to those produced by first language learners. First language interference plays a significant role in the process of lexical acquisition of verbs although this interference is not merely a transfer of surface syntactic forms from the native to the target language. If a more sophisticated understanding of the process of interference can be gained, it should be possible to predict the characteristic errors a second language learner will make based upon the particulars of the learner's native language. (RW)

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Acquisition of lexical items by the adult second language learner: A case study

(Paper presented at the Seventh Annual Boston University Conference on Language Development, October 8-10, 1982)

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The contrastive analysis hypothesis as first proposed by Lado (1957) argued that a comparison of the source and target languages of the second language learner would allow one to predict the errors that learner would make. This was possible, according to the hypothesis, since such errors would stem from interference between the structures of the two languages. Much of the dissatisfaction with that theory over the past years has been due to the fact that many of the predictions concerning errors made by comparisons of source and target languages have proved to be wrong. While the contrastive analysis hypothesis has been able to predict what structures of the second language will present problems for the language learner, it has been unable to accurately predict how the language learner will deal with those structures, thus unable to predict the actual errors which will be encountered. This failure to make accurate predictions concerning the nature of the second language learner's errors is due in large part to a lack of understanding of the process of interference in second language learning.

In this paper I will try to give some content to the previously ill-defined notion of interference and argue that although interference plays a significant role in the acquisition of a second language, this does not rule out the hypothesis that first and second language acquisition are similar processes. Specifically, I will show that the process of lexical acquisition of verbs in English is similar for both first and second language learners and that certain instances of so-called interference errors by second language learners can be seen as lexical over-generalizations not unlike those of first language learners.

Thus, I will demonstrate that the differences in the nature and occurrence of the errors produced by first and second language learners can be accounted for given a more sophisticated understanding of the process of interference. This in turn will allow us to predict those errors that a second language learner of a particular first language background is likely to make, as well as those that he or she should not make.

To illustrate the mechanics of my analysis I will present the results of a case study conducted from February 6 to May 30, 1982 on the acquisition of English in a natural environment by a native speaker of French. The subject, Gilles, 33 years of age, had studied English in secondary school in France; however, his knowledge of English was limited upon his arrival in the United States in August of 1981. In February of 1982 when the study began, Gilles was able to express himself fairly easily, however, he still made quite a few errors in speaking. I recorded Gilles' spontaneous speech in half-hour sessions at one to two-week internals over a period of four months.

The problem I will be concerned with in this study is Gilles' productive use of dative verb structures with indirect object pronouns. Following recent usage, I am including in the class of dative verbs both those verbs which allow dative alternation such as tell in John told me the story, and those which do not, such as explain in John explained the story to me. By examining a number of sentences with dative structures produced by the subject, I will propose the following analysis of the process of lexical acquisition of verbs which will become clear in the subsequent discussion:

1) The second language learner, like the first language learner, begins by creating a single lexical entry for each verb which allows only one, initial syntactic subcategorization.

2) For both first and second language learners this syntactic subcategorization is given the status of the unmarked form of the verb and, as such, will be generalized to other verbs of similar semantic type.

3) For both the first and second language learner the first obligatory subcategorization frame for a particular verb will therefore result either from direct positive evidence for such a syntactic representation, or from generalization of an unmarked form.

4) The second language learner, like the first language learner, creates additional marked subcategorization frames only on the basis of positive evidence.

Assuming the above analysis, it is possible to explain the errors in the use of dative structures produced by the subject as the result of an incorrect choice of marked and unmarked subcategorization frames in English, support for which can be found both in English and in the subject's native language, French.

I have chosen in this study to adopt a lexical analysis of dative alternation and other formerly transformational operations as proposed in Bresnan (1978, 1980) and elsewhere. Such an analysis allows the productivity of dative alternation to be

limited to specific verbs or verb classes in the lexicon since the language learner will make separate entries in the lexicon for each syntactic form allowed by any given verb. Thus, a lexical approach allows us to explain why children do not systematically overgeneralize operations such as dative alternation but rather seem to learn them gradually on a verb-by-verb basis. It will also allow us, as will be shown subsequently, to explain why the overgeneralizations made by second language learners may differ from those of first language learners. The choice of a lexical model of grammar, however, while attractive to this study, is not necessarily required for the analysis, nor is this study an attempt to determine whether dative alternation should in fact be interpreted as a lexical or as a transfromational rule, an issue which has received much attention in recent literature.

I will first briefly outline the acquisition of dative verbs for first language learners. I will then propose a similar process for the second language learner based on the data collected in this study which will, at the same time account for the differences in the nature of the errors produced by first and second language learners.

When the first language learner hears a sentence such as:

5) John told the story to her.

he or she begins by creating a lexical entry for the verb <u>tell</u> with an initial subcategorization of [V NP PP] as illustrated below:

6) tell, V, [___ NP PP]

He or she assumes, furthermore, that unless there is positive evidence to the contrary, there is only one syntactic, or surface, form of a verb for each semantic form. This is in accordance with Wexler's 'uniqueness principle' as cited in Roeper (1981) and is stated in (1) above. Let us assume that this syntactic subcategorization is given the status of the unmarked form of the verb. As such, it will be generalized to other verbs of similar semantic type as is stated in (2). Thus, upon hearing sentence (5) and creating a lexical entry as in (6) for the verb tell, the first language learner may generalize this construction to other verbs which are semantically similar such as explain or say. Further justification for the generalization of lexical forms based on the semantic class to which verbs belong can be found in Grimshaw (1979, 1981).

It should be noted here that the viability of this argument hinges on the determination of the marked and unmarked forms of verbs since unmarked forms will be generalized without positive evidence. In this study I am assuming, contrary to theories of markedness proposed by Williams (1981) and others, that markedness is a language-specific feature. Thus, while a given lexical form may be unmarked in English, it may be marked in another language, say French. While it may be true that the child's initial hypothesis concerning an unmarked form in a language is based on some universal unmarked case as proposed in Williams, the final determination of the unmarked form, and thus the form to be generalized will be language-specific. In the case of dative verbs in English, I have assumed that the subcategorization in (6) is the unmarked form since the majority

of dative verbs allow only this syntactic form while only a small number allow dative alternation. Further study of the theory of markedness is of course needed in order to shed more light on questions such as the generalization of acquired lexical forms discussed here.

When the first language learner hears a sentence such as:

7) John told her the story.

he or she will then create a second lexical entry for the verb tell:

8) tell, V, [___ NP NP]

which will be related to the initial entry for the verb tell by a lexical redundancy rule. Further explanation of the mechanics of this operation can be found in Bresnan (1978, 1980). This second subcategorization will be considered marked and as such will not be generalized to other verbs of the same semantic class. Thus, since as stated in (4), additional marked subcategorization frames will be created only on the basis of positive evidence and since the child will never hear sentences such as:

9) *John explained me the reason.

10) *Mary said me something.

he or she should not create additional subcategorization frames for these verbs. It should be noted that in the majority of cases ungrammatical sentences of this type have not been found in the data collected on children's speech. The few faulty generalizations of this type that have been reported in the

literature would be allowed for by our theory, if upon hearing a sentence such as (7), the child's initial hypothesis was that the double-object construction with dative verbs was in fact the unmarked form of these verbs. However, since the child would also hear sentences such as (5) as well as other sentences of the [V NP PP] construction with verbs such as explain and say, and since, according to the uniqueness principle, there should only be one syntactic form of the verb for each semantic form, he or she would soon replace the [V NP NP] subcategorization for these verbs originally hypothesized as the unmarked form, by the much more frequent [V NP PP] form. Later, upon hearing other sentences with the verb tell in the double-object construction, he or she would add a second subcategorization frame for that verb which, this time, would correctly be considered as the marked form.

Given this analysis of the acquisition of dative verbs by first language learners, we will now look at examples of sentences using such dative verbs produced by our second language learner. Consider the following ungrammatical sentences:

11) *You explained me the rule many times.

12) *He said me that it was difficult.

These and many other similar ungrammatical sentences produced by Gilles appear to challenge our acquisition theory. They are similar in construction to examples (9) and (10), sentences which, according to our theory, should not normally be uttered by the language learner if we consider the [V NP NP] subcategorization in (8) to be the marked form of the verb and as such created

only on the basis of positive evidence. I propose, however, that in contrast to the first language learner, Gilles' unmarked form for explain/say/tell-type verbs with indirect object pronouns is in fact that of (8). If this were the case, we would then expect faulty generalizations of the sort produced in (11) and (12) since unmarked syntactic subcategorization frames may in fact be generalized without positive evidence. I base this claim on the fact that evidence in support of Gilles' choice of the double-object construction as the unmarked form of theses verbs can be found not only in English, but also in French.

According to our theory and as stated in (3), the first obligatory subcategorization frame for a verb will result either from direct positive evidence for such a syntactic representation or from generalization of an unmarked form. A sentence such as number (7) would in fact provide Gilles with positive evidence in English for the [V NP NP] subcategorization with explain/say/tell-type verbs. But this alone would not seem to be sufficient evidence for two reasons: first, the majority of the sentences heard with this class of verbs would have the [V NP PP] form rather than the double-object construction, and, second, as we have seen, the first language learner in the vast majority of cases does not incorrectly assume the double-object construction to be the unmarked form of the verb even though he or she may hear this construction used in sentences with the verb tell. Other evidence is therefore needed to support Gilles' incorrect choice of the double-object construction as the unmarked form for dative verbs. This evidence can be found in French in constructions involving cliticization, an operation which places the

indirect object pronoun directly before the verb as in:

13) Il m'explique la règle.
'He explains the rule to me.'

In French, cliticization of indirect object pronouns as seen in (13) is obligatory in almost all cases. There are only a few instances in which the pronominal indirect object may appear in complement position, as, for example, in sentences which are contrastive in nature such as:

14) Je le dirai à toi, mais pas à Marie.
'I will tell it to you but not to Mary.'

Given this fact and assuming once again a lexical analysis of cliticization as proposed in Rivas (1977) and Jaeggli (1980), it seems reasonable to conclude that the unmarked subcategorization for dative verbs with pronominal indirect objects in French is:

15) expliquer V, [NP ___ NP]

where the first NP is the indirect object pronoun clitic. It should be noted here that I have chosen to ignore reflexive and direct object clitics in this representation as they are not relevant to the present discussion. I have also chosen to ignore full-NP indirect objects as they are placed after the verb in both French and English and as such are not a cause of errors on the part of the second language learner.

If we now reconsider Gilles' acquisition of dative verbs in English we have more convincing evidence for his choice of the [V NP NP] subcategorization in (8) as the unmarked form. We have

said that positive evidence for this form exists in English in sentences such as (7). Furthermore, there is no positive evidence in English to allow for the placement of the indirect object pronoun in a preverbal position as in French. It would appear then that Gilles' choice of the [V NP NP] subcategorization as the unmarked form in English is an attempt on his part to treat pronouns in English in a similar way as in French, since the double-object construction allows for the placement of the indirect object pronoun directly after the verb and as such can be seen as a sort of cliticization for which there is positive evidence in English. This choice on Gilles' part seems all the more likely when we consider that cliticization in French also allows for the placement of the indirect object clitic directly after the verb in the case of affirmative imperatives as in:

16) Expliquez-<u>moi</u> la règle.
'Explain the rule to me.'

Thus, we may conclude that upon hearing sentences such as (7), Gilles, given his knowledge of the rules for cliticization of indirect object pronouns in French, created a lexical entry for the verb <u>tell</u> in which the initial, unmarked syntactic subcategorization was [V NP NP], as in (8). Since unmarked lexical forms will be generalized without positive evidence, we would expect Gilles to create similar lexical entries for verbs of the same semantic type as <u>tell</u>. The ungrammatical sentences in (11) and (12), together with other similar utterances collected in this study are evidence of such faulty generalizations on Gilles' part and therefore lend support to our acquisition

theory.

In conclusion, the data presented in this study allow us to come to some tentative conclusions concerning the nature of second language acquisition. The evidence argues against both those who say that the processes of first and second language acquisition are fundamentally different and those who maintain that they are identical. Instead, the results support the position that the language acquisition process, while essentially the same for first and second language learners, is influenced in the case of the second language learner by his or her knowledge of the native language. In particular, we have seen evidence which indicates that while the second language learner acquires English dative verbs according to the same process as native speakers of English, he or she produces overgeneralization errors unlike those of the first language learner due to an incorrect assumption concerning marked and unmarked forms in English, for which there is positive evidence in both the source and target languages. Thus, it appears that first language interference plays a significant role in the process of lexical acquisition of verbs although this interference is not, as has been proposed elsewhere, merely a transfer of surface syntactic forms from the native to the target language.

If the theory proposed here is accurate, we should find other examples of the type of first language interference described here in the data being collected on second language acquisition. Furthermore, it seems likely that first language interference of the sort discussed here may also play a significant role in the acquisition of other syntactic

operations. This being the case, research in the field of second language acquisition must give increased attention not only to rules in the target language, but also to those in the source language of the second language learner.

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